

A TEACHER'S PORTFOLIO

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A Thesis

Presented to

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In Partial Fulfillment  
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by

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This thesis is a teacher-created portfolio which I use in my ninth grade classroom as an instructional tool. A portfolio is much, much more than simply a folder that students keep all their writings in; it is a compilation of progress, failures, attempts, personal drudgery, and wonderful successes. I use this portfolio with my students to illustrate various techniques of writing, genres, writing styles, and development of character or plot. I hope it will be a model for other teachers who wish to write and to share that writing with their students.

My portfolio is composed of various types of writing: a journal, some poetry, an essay, and two story teasers. A journal is always a personal voyage that one embarks upon only to find that there are characters onboard. It is a means of

expression without judgment or criticism. My journal entries are usually about my students and the events that occur within my classroom.

Poetry is an experience with words, sounds, letters, and rhymes. I usually find that once students catch on to poetry, they enjoy it; but they need models to get them started. I use my models to demonstrate the concept or assignment that I am teaching. For example, I might read "Silliest Sunsets South of Sutherfield" and then ask the students to use the same character, Pickle, and put him into a different situation or to retell the story from Beutha's viewpoint.

The students provide the endings to the story teasers. If they wish, they may add descriptions, characters, or more action. Then, students exchange their stories and read the different endings.

Models help the students to recognize the important writing techniques that they will be responsible for and, at the same time, improve their writing skills with practice.

Accepted by:

  
  


Chair

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## Preface

Writing is like a passage or corridor that I walk through on my way to a definite destination. Many rooms lead off from this passage that I explore in reaching my destination, for it is in exploring these rooms that many of my ideas take shape or color. One room may be a room of minutiae or details that a writer uses for embellishment or amplification; another may be a room of images that the writer experiences and then writes about. Writing is often, for me, therapy. You can express exactly what you feel when you feel it. It is movement, sight, sound, taste, and even smell.

Usually when I start something, be it a short story or country song or journal entry, I have an idea rolling around in my head that needs fixed status. I usually have some description of the setting or details about the plot or the personalities of the characters before I ever begin writing, because I often think ideas over before I ever commit them to paper. Sometimes characters live inside my head for a few days before I decide to give them life on paper. Sometimes I have even had characters "talking" inside my head, and I have worried

that a therapist might conclude that I was hearing "voices." But this is my style of prewriting, and it is effective for me as a writer.

This has not always been my manner. In the past, I often simply began with paper and pencil and not one completed idea in my head. I believe this is called organic writing. I also found that, for me, this is not very productive. I need ideas or topics somewhat formed and molded before I begin writing. The idea has to pull at me. I have to stay an active participant in my writing to produce an effective paper.

My students feel the same. If they find a topic that they are passionate or heated up about, they write longer because they have more to say. If they are involved with the subject, they write with more gusto. They have more emotional depth in a subject that they are in tune with.

Of course, this leads to a personal belief. To enjoy writing, a writer must have a love of words. I love words and the sounds of words, and I try to instill that in the students. The emotional aspect of English has always intrigued me. How is it that mere words have the emotional power to overthrow a government, incite a mob, move a people toward peace, or part the Red Sea?

Language can be felt, seen, heard, and touched. It is connected to rhythm and tempo, to sights and images, to

perspective and shadow. Words can also be twisted to set guilty men free, be manipulated to elect a president, or be aimed to wound fragile hearts. I tell the students that they can be very powerful if they learn to handle the English language. I do not think they fully understand that statement as ninth graders. As they mature, I hope they will.

Students are very creative. Even my poorest students have many ideas that they enjoy exploring. Some of the best comedians that I have ever met have sat in my classroom and displayed that talent to their peers. Kids really want to have fun with writing.

In my Advanced Placement English 12 class, they wrote their own comedy and then performed it for the student body. They day the play opened, they were terribly nervous, because even though we had laughed ourselves silly while practicing The Prince and His Three Princesses, they did not necessarily think their peers would appreciate their effort. So, the day of our play came, and I saw how nervous they were, and I know how nervous I was, and I have to admit I was scared for them. But I also knew how well-written the play was and how much heart and soul they had poured into the practice, and I waited.

I did not have long to wait because once the play started rolling, they were excellent. The crowd, and remember that peers are the harshest critics of all, roared with laughter.



I was standing in the wings, and as they came off the stage, they would exclaim, "Miss Prater, they're laughing. They're really laughing." So, after the play was over, I simply listened to them talk, and they were very excited and proud of what they had accomplished. I wish every piece of writing my students did could receive this much attention and acclaim. It would give them a tremendous amount of confidence.

However, there are some types of writing that I believe both students and teachers need to do for self-exploration without anyone else evaluating it. Journals are excellent for self-expression. Kids often need to write about subjects that are tearing them apart inside without others' judgment. They can be honest without fear of anyone else reading the very heart of their honesty. Journals are PRIVATE in my classroom; they are not for publication.

My own exigency as a writer probably span the Grand Canyon, but I am becoming more comfortable with my own writing. That is sad in a way, because I certainly like to write, but never really had the background training to pinpoint my weaknesses and strengths until years of practice had gone by, much of that in my own classroom.

Some of that vulnerability carries over into grading. Students fear grading. My little ninth graders take things so personally that I always make sure that when we talk about

grades, I focus on nothing but the paper itself. I do not inject anything personal, for example, "Kathy, you could do better if your parents gave you more help with your homework," or "Susan, if you weren't so lazy, you could improve on your sentence structure and variety with a little more practice." To highlight a personality trait or home situation shifts the attention away from the paper and to an emotional area which can create battleground tactics.

In my classroom, students are responsible for peer editing and revising. I hand out peer editing sheets for each piece of writing that they do and then each writer must get as many different students in the class to edit and evaluate as possible. I disallow comments such as, "this is nice," or "this is good," or "this is stupid." Peer editors must give specific recommendations or cite specific needs. For example, they can offer praise or commend the writers on wonderful dialogue that make the characters seem real or the amount of time spent on illustrations or format.

I comment on each piece of writing that my students do. I feel that if I give the prompt or make the assignment and feel that it is important, then they have the classroom right to receive a reply from me. In responding to student writing, I grade specific problem areas. For example, if I have been teaching sentence structure or voice and have them write an

essay entitled "Downtown Saturday Night," then I grade only those concepts that I have taught. From that point on, they are responsible for that concept in all the writings that they do. By the end of the year, we have covered many concepts or skills and their writing has improved.

Students need to read to improve not only writing skills, but problem solving and critical thinking skills as well. Some of the best ideas that I ever conceived came after reading many different styles and authors. I love the language of E. B. White, Sylvia Plath, Willa Cather, William Faulkner, and F. Scott Fitzgerald. They had a masterful command of the language and styles that commanded respect from the reader. They were authors who loved words and realized the great emotional potential that the pen holds. Of course, my students say that R. L. Stine, Christopher Pike, and Stephen King have all these attributes. This is a discussion that we still have not resolved in Miss Prater's class. I am not giving ground, but neither are they.

Finally, writing is a life-long process that all of us should be actively engaged in. As a teacher, I can not expect my students to write if I do not write. Nor can I expect them to be "expert" writers at the ninth grade level, because they have not really experienced many rooms of life. They are walking through the corridors as I am. I can only hope that I light

some fire of inspiration and guide them through the stages of writing and encourage them to continue writing as I have done. Each child has the right to explore his or her ideas.

## Journal

School has started today and this is a new beginning. A new sunrise for these students and a new sunrise for me. This is going to be my attitude this year, that each day is a new start. Failure is a word that I will not introduce into the vocabulary. New students with spanking new notebooks and unsharpened pencils. Yes, I've been in this business long enough to know that they soon run out of paper, lose their books and pencils within three weeks, and come to class looking to me to furnish them with the necessary items to survive in this class! However, I've definite plans this year, probably better thought-out plans than I've had the past eight years. We are going to write, write, write, but we are going to write with definite purposes. Even if they learn only one fact - a period goes at the end of a sentence - they will learn something.

Furthermore, I want them to enjoy coming to my class, our class. Even if they haven't done anything for the past eight years, even if they don't plan to accomplish anything but find a boyfriend or girlfriend this year, I want them to leave my classroom feeling good about themselves because they put forth themselves. I want to feel good about myself because I put forth myself. And just maybe, I can sneak in a few things in such a way that they learn without really knowing it. Make

it painless to learn and enjoyable too.

### This Too Shall Pass

Students who use lame excuses for lost or neglected or unremembered homework. Students who come to school hungry or sad or lost. Teachers who get burn-out after ten years. Principals who forget what it is like to be in the trenches fighting for survival. Administrators who have forgotten the way to the high school or the personalities of the teachers who have been in their employ for twenty-seven years. This too shall pass.

Students who bore us with their constant complaints of boredom. Students who stare at us with empty, sad eyes. Beauty queens who spend thirty minutes of teachers' class time applying cosmetics. Boys who eye the girls until their eyes pop out and roll down the aisle right up to the desk and into the trash can. This too shall pass.

Students who wait until the teacher is in the middle of her lecture she spent forty minutes the night before preparing for to ask, "what's for lunch today?" Students who meet you in the hall to talk about the abuse and neglect she is facing at home. The student who cries on the teacher's shoulder because she just learned that her grandmother died. This too shall pass.

This life too shall pass.

## The ABC's of Happiness

Aspire to reach beyond what you can see to what you cannot see.

Believe in yourself at all times for all reasons.

Count your blessings every day.

Devote yourself passionately to a cause.

Educate yourself to the highest degree possible.

Forgive all quarrels.

Give to the unlovely, unwanted, and unfortunate.

Help others bear their burdens.

Inspire others with your idealism and enthusiasm.

Judge not lest you be judged.

Know your limitations and seek to soar above them.

Love life to the fullest.



Mend old wounds and quarrels.

Noble thoughts develop character and inspire great works.

Open your mind to new ideas.

Petition your God for help for humanity.

Question and learn.

Rejoice with a full heart of gladness.

Shower your friends and family with kindness.

Tame your temper and discipline your anger.

Understand the plight of all men.

Value life's darker moments of sadness and sorrow.

Withhold no good thing from a child.

X-ray your life and be honest with yourself.

Zestfully pursue life's dreams.

## Journal

How do I possibly tell Nettie that she smells without hurting her feelings? Because I've come to realize feelings are fragile things that once hurt are slow to mend. How do I tell her that the kids avoid her because they do not have the diplomacy to withstand such things as smells and bad breath? How do I tell her that kids can often be cruel and spiteful and say things that remain in one's heart, sometimes for years? How do I tell her that the loneliness she often finds unbearable is because she doesn't wear designer labels or because she doesn't drive a fast-moving sports car? How do you teach children that just wearing the same clothes, sometimes two days in a row doesn't make you an outsider? How do you teach children to look past the labels and brand names or the lack thereof to the person beneath? Are our children becoming so label-oriented that it's only the surface that really matters, not the dreams and hopes and wishes and person deep down inside?

My prayer for Nettie is that she finds a friend whose compassion will dampen the smell and reach out to the soul buried beneath that surface.

## Journal

### Solomon's Wisdom

Teachers need the wisdom of Solomon these days. KERA demands high standards from teachers and students learning the 75 outcomes and parents are squeezed in there somewhere. Sometimes, I wonder where we are leading students. Are we really preparing them for careers in carpentry and space exploration, or are we teaching to fulfill state requirements mandated by men and women who, if they ever were in a classroom, have long ago left for the greener pasture? Are we really preparing kids for life? Teaching them the basics like if you lose, you show sportsmanship by congratulating the winning team even if you have to squeeze your gut to do so? Teaching them to view failure as a stepping stone to a greater triumph later? Teaching them compassion for their fellowman, yes, we are our brother's keeper. Teaching them that they are the future and that means responsibility. Teachers need windows in their hearts to view the future, maybe not with the human eye, but the vision within, the hope that they purpose within their marrow. The 75 outcomes should be taught with the Ten Commandments; hence, a lesson in life and compassion combined to produce a child into a responsible and caring adult.

## Journal

I think I understand why some children come to school and simply cannot concentrate on their schoolwork because their minds are so crowded with worries and cares. I had my mind crowded today too. It was so hard to teach sentence structure and sentence variety as I thought about my grandmother lying in her bed at home dying of cancer, as I thought about my sister Martha going to court in a custody battle over little Adam, as I thought about my friend planning her wedding to a handsome man (I'm jealous), and my pantyhose have a runner the size of a marathon.

Sometimes I think a lot of the little, mundane things can add up to huge mountains that we struggle to climb over. The kids see things in a different perspective. Small things in our eyes seem large in theirs. Things we brush off like gnats are serious to them, and I often need to remind myself of that fact. I must take the time to pause, really stop, and listen to what they are saying to me. I have to remember that if they think it's important enough for me to hear, it's important enough for me to listen.

If I could only have the wisdom to differentiate between what is important and what is mundane and useless, I might teach a lesson in life's greater realities.

## Journal

They were wonderful today! They were angels! Okay, something's going on. It has to be a conspiracy. They are planning some horrible plot from one of those blood-gushing, machete-slashing B movies they've seen two thousand of on late Saturday nights. But no, they are receptive today and actually eager to work. There are days, many of these days, like today when my classes come together as a unit and work eagerly and excitingly. The slight roar is pleasant, not harsh, and the busyness is industrious, not social.

I'm amazed at their creativity and ideas as I gaze around the room. They work and when they're finished, they are so eager for me to see their finished product and I'm eager to see and read what they've accomplished. They seem very proud of what they've done and I try to encourage all their work and the effort behind that work, especially the students who have to work so very hard for their end product.

It is days like today when I really believe we do touch the future and perhaps one of these kids will grow up, no, perhaps many of these kids will grow up and really change the world around.

## Journal

A new year approaches. A new year sweeps in with snow and promises of better and grander dreams and hopes. A new year brings new slates to write new pages of our lives upon. We are going to lose weight! We are going to dye our hair a shocking red! We are going to find the man of our dreams! Yeah, right!

A new year brings many Mondays in which we long and pine and hope for Fridays!

## JOURNAL

We wrote our New Year's Resolutions today. Mine are the following:

To remember that as a teacher I do make a difference although I may not see the results for many, many years.

To listen to each child's need and respond to that need to the best of my ability and resources.

To refuse negative information about a child that may color my perception of him to the detriment of each of us.

To encourage the talents that I see exercised in my children.

To respond to the hurts, abuses, and agonies that I may learn exist in the homes of these children.

To see each child as a precious soul that is eternal. To realize that I have been entrusted with that soul if only for a short while to care for and nurture.

To teach my subject to the best of my abilities and talents.

To laugh in our season and to cry in our season.

To retire or leave knowing that I gave teaching my dedication, even if that means the whole of my heart.



## Journal

Shelby Warner died today. At 18 he crossed the threshold of death. I've thought about him a great deal this week; he's been on my mind constantly.

I remember him walking into the 9th grade with such a smile on his face, laughing with and talking to his friends, and that's how I remember him the last time that I saw him. I remember seeing him sitting in his desk after finishing an assignment and drawing some picture, I don't remember what it was, and realizing he had a talent, a talent he used.

I remember him walking into 12th grade with that same smile and pleasant disposition. I remember once another student kissed me and I said, "Nathan, you can't kiss the teacher." And I remember Shelby rushing up to my desk and kissing me. It was such fun!

I remember so many small things that seemed ordinary and trivial at the time, but now, I realize that they added up to the sum of his short life. Flashes of images color the screen that Shelby produced and directed. It was his own script and he wrote it just the way he wanted it.

I remember he wrote an essay for his senior portfolio entitled "Dying to Live" that was so poignant because of the real-life struggle behind the words. The content of that essay

came from a place in his heart that only he knew, the fear that, although many loved him, they could not feel this fear for him, or walk this journey for him.

I have to remember some day soon to get a copy of that essay for Teresa, his sister, to keep. I think she would understand all those words Shelby wrote to express how he felt - he wanted to live!

Lord, grant me the courage to reach out to each and every student, because I do not know what lies in their future and I want them to know that I care for them and even love the very essence of what and who they are.

In memory of Shelby and Myra and Sam.

## Journal

Today, again, I think I understand why some children come to school and somehow manage to do so little. Their minds are cluttered with everything but school. Today I had a ninth grader that cried all during first period because her mother had decided to leave. There sat Elizabeth, crying because she didn't know how to iron, didn't know how to prepare breakfast for herself or her brother, and didn't know how to get herself up in time for school. As a result, she was late. And yes, I know it's true, a ninth-grader should know how to do simple, basic household chores, but that was beside the point today.

Her mother was gone and she was crushed. She couldn't understand why she had left and left Elizabeth to fend for herself.

Update - Elizabeth is now four months pregnant and living with her boyfriend's family.

Then Kristina's grandmother died and she cried on my shoulder, literally.

Then, Cindy Sue thinks she is pregnant and is actually excited about it.

"But, Cindy Sue," I said, "you're only in the 9th grade. You don't have a job, or a husband. What are you going to do."

"I'll worry about that later," she replied.

How can I worry about whether they learn sentence structure

and coherence in a paragraph when they are more concerned about forgetting to take the pill and their parents divorcing? KERA hasn't addressed these concerns yet.

## Journal

The kids chose the topic today and it was, What not to do on a date. Okay, here goes.

### The Don'ts of Dating

1. Don't slam your date's fingers in the car door as you awkwardly try to open and close the door for her. This takes practice. Practice on your sister or mother.
2. Do not go through football or basketball withdrawal. Your date will think you are trying to get fresh and will hit you with the purse she is carrying. Beware of purses. They are extremely dangerous weapons. One state even tried unsuccessfully to get them outlawed.
3. Don't discuss your ex-girlfriend's beautiful blond locks when your date's hair is going through that painful transition of going back to its natural shade of red or brown.
4. Don't pick your nose even when the room or car is dark. She does notice it and feels disgusted. Furthermore, you can be assured she will tell her friends which limits your dates for the next four years.
5. Don't think you're impressing her by wearing those muscle T-shirts when you have no muscles. Leave something to the imagination. All of us love a mystery.

## Journal

Today we start a unit on poetry, class, and some terms we're going to be learning and using are rhyme and rhythm. Rhyme is the repetition of sounds at the ends of words. "Yes, Shannon, you may write a poem about the Grim Reaper."

"No, Shannon, I would prefer that you didn't write about your first sexual encounter."

"Okay, class, that's enough."

Rhythm is the pattern of beats, or stresses, in spoken or written language.

"No, Shannon, I would prefer that you expand a little bit and not write about French kissing."

"Okay, class, I think we need to grow up here."

Today was loosely structured and I allowed the kids to really write about subjects they chose, except for some of the topics Shannon was bound and determined to write about, and write in the style they felt they would be comfortable with. Many of them experimented with rhymes. Some wrote poems about love or nature. Many of them wrote about death and blood.

## Journal

He is the one I could spank! He's always into trouble and raising someone's blood pressure. The list of his crimes reads like a felon's: suspension for drugs, suspension for fighting, suspension for possession of pot, in-school suspension for smoking in the boy's bathroom, and finally, expulsion for drugs.

But there's also a soft spot in me for him. There's something about him that draws me to him like flies to manure! Perhaps if he had had a more stable upbringing or stricter guidelines that he had had to follow, someone to teach him about discipline and consequences for actions.

I told him one day that if had been mine, the rules would have been as follows: in by ten on schoolnights, no rough crowd allowed in the house, haircut every three months, and no smoking or drinking. Also, I would recite the Ten Commandments before he left for school. "Ms. Prater, you're tough on kids," he said. "But I think I could have handled it."

His life exists on the streets; his death will probably come on the streets. For I have discovered that his mother lives hundreds of miles away; his father hasn't been around for years, and his grandmother is soon going to a nursing home. What is going to become of this child at fifteen who has no guidance, but what we are providing here at school?

## Journal

Muriel Rukeyser said, "The universe is made of stories, not of atoms." I feel that statement came to life in my classroom today. These children love to make-believe, pretend. Why is it that they love to make up stories and characters and plots? Do they crawl into those characters and live those fantasy lives if only for a few minutes or for the time it takes for them to write the stories.

Does Kristee live those romances she's so fond of writing? Is she dreaming of a knight-in-shining-armor? Is Rebecca wishing she had been born during the frontier days when "tumbleweed rolled through the prairie town"? Is John cloaked in that Columbo-coat as he sleuths about town looking for the murderer of the socialite and her wayward son? Is Matt lost in the wilderness with his dog and searching for his long-last brother?

Their stories are often modeled on what they've been reading, but I often hear their voices coming through loud and strong. And when they read them in front of their peers and when the kids acclaim them, you know it's really been worth it.



## Journal

Our journal entry for today was entitled, "If I were stranded on a deserted island, what seven things would I want with me and why?" My list is as follows.

1. I would wish for a journal and a good writing pen. Believe it or not, I find that a good deal of time slips away when you are thinking about them. You can always write a description of the island in minute detail for the travel magazines when you are rescued and arrive home. You need a good writing pen because a pen that blots is a pen that nots the hand.
2. I would wish for a Mel Gibson look-alike. Believe it or not, I find that a good deal of time slips away when you are talking to that certain "some one" that shares the island with you.
3. I would wish for a Tom Cruise look-alike. Believe it or not, I find that a good deal of time slips away when you are taking acting lessons from that certain "some one" that shares the island with you.
4. I would wish for a can of Mace. I hear due to pollution, that mosquitos are the size of small apples on these deserted islands and often cause a disease called puppdiaherrane.
5. I would wish for a Elvis look-alike. Perhaps I'll even run into the real Elvis as people have reported that they saw Elvis on several different islands basking in the sun and wearing blue suede shoes.

6. I would wish for natives with bows and arrows.  
It may take some heavy persuasion to convince  
me to stay on the island.
7. I would wish for a hut to raise my many children  
after being persuaded by the chief of the natives  
to honor him by becoming his wife.

## Journal

One student has had more boyfriends than I've had cavities and makes no secret of the fact that she sleeps with them all.

"Haven't you heard of AIDS?" I asked her one day.

"Yeah, but it won't happen to me," she replied.

"That's what many people thought until it happened to them."

"Miss Prater, you need to quit worrying so much and get a life."

"At least, I'll have a life," I told her.

Did it sink in? I hope so, but I doubt it because today she informed me that she had a new boyfriend and they were really in love.

How do I teach business letters and organization when I find myself overwhelmed with some pressing matters like sex, AIDS, and drugs pervading their lives?

But I wonder what their lives will be like ten years from now and I ache inside, because I really like them more than they realize. I simply hope that the dawns of their lives find them awaking each day with hope and not dread and despair.

## Journal

What in this world are these students doing these days? Some of them are taking such risks with their bodies, their minds, their futures, their health. Can parents really have no idea what their children are doing? How can some of these children be coming home at three in the morning after going to a party where alcohol is served, and sometimes drugs? It makes me so angry!

One little girl wrote in her journal that she had invited a friend over and that they had slipped out after midnight to meet some boys. They didn't return until early the next morning in time to get ready for school. Her mother asked them the next morning why they had been so quiet and the girl replied that they had been so tired that they couldn't stay awake! Give me a break! Girls do not spend the night together and fall asleep because they are so tired. I remembered all the times my mother often slipped into our bedrooms just to check on us girls, often making sure our covers were pulled up over us or to kiss us or to sit beside us until we fell asleep.

My students think I'm old-fashioned and out-of-date, and I'm beginning to agree that I'm not very fond of this generation's standards.

## Journal

I have had that powerful feeling of just being thankful that I'm alive. A pulsing, beating feeling of being alive and thinking and touching and smelling and seeing the world around me. I find that I often wish this feeling, felt for only moments in time, would grow strong, then stronger until those moments or times of depression cannot overwhelm me.

The world is often chaotic and perilous and I hear the stories of abuse and rape and killing and hate and I wonder where the connection comes in. How can we be so attuned to that feeling of being thankful to be alive and still attuned to the awful tragedies around us?

Then I realize that this time in history is mine and I can decide what I am going to do with my niche in life. But the life I live is the death I die, and I must remember that.

## Journal

What do you do about the kid that has decided he's going to marry you?

1. Assign sentences. "I will not daydream about Ms. Prater" 50 times.
2. Assign in-school suspension and an essay. "Why it is not feasible for me to marry Ms. Prater."
3. Assign extra English homework. Guaranteed to break the habit of the most die-hard romantic.
4. Assign him to Mrs. Pettion's class. She is a Cindy Crawford look-alike.
5. Assign him to Saturday work program. Working to support Ms. Prater is going to cause undue sweat and labor.
6. Assign him to 5th period class. The girls in that class are walking hormones.
7. Assign him the care he deserves and feel flattered. The crushes pass with the graduation diploma.

POEMS

by

Louise Prater

### Under Duress for Mental Stress

After twenty years I felt detested, performance-tested, and under duress, so I made the request for a leave based on mental stress. I never had so many guests

arrive in my classroom to ingest, divest and pre-test my students and me. Invest in a good retirement system and have houseguests, for a fee, of course, You can't

retest students after they graduate. So in self-interest I professed my love for teaching and confessed my burn-out. Predigest your reasons for teaching, they replied.

I repressed the mental anguish and manifested the interest in KERA until I undressed, rested, and disinfecting myself. I went northwest, not on vacation, but on seminar

to suggest the t-test, teacher test?, and then went northwest to protest the outrageous money being spent for tests when I could field-test validly teacher stress under duress

for mental stress.



### Silliest Sunsets South of Sutherfield

He lies on a porch with a long line of losers,  
drinking whiskey, smoking cigarettes,  
hauling himself up off the swing,  
dropped himself onto the porch, finding tidbits  
of southern gossip like pieces in a quilt.

Sutherfield is the only graveyard he's ever known  
since the third grade. He lies now on the veranda  
with a quilt over his head, waiting for the sun-  
ball to drop into the valley and crash into the  
twilight of nightness.

"PICKLE!" The screech of his wife's voice echoes  
deep in the chamber of his bones and rises again  
in the next morning. "I'd like to pickle her,"  
he mumbles quietly. But she hears him and revenges  
herself by dying, dying old and gray and aged and  
gnarled. By burying him, again and again and again.

He has a silly grin buried in his mouth and he plays  
it again and again until she finally stuffs his mouth  
with a rag. "You'll never get the best of me, Pickle,"  
she screams. "You're right, Beutha, I never got the  
best of you in your life, I just got the worst of ya."

## Folded Wings

Delicate wings,  
fashioned in soft blues of sky,  
oranges of oranges of trees,  
yellows of sun-balls,  
blacks of twilight nights,  
softly closes,

Quick to the touch  
Springs open.

Fragile as spider's webs,  
Thin as paper silk,  
Soft as babies, new  
Life vibrant in colors,  
In spirit,  
In beauty,  
In all things that God has created  
and designed  
and executed.

### Sunshine Slashing Through the Snow

The sunshine is slashing through the snow  
And seven birds are singing in the branches  
Of trees that are naked and bare and sensitive.

Shadows have slithered away in silence  
And there is a sense of serenity here  
A solemn sermon that is heard in nature  
The sentinel watches from hide-a-way places  
And then scoops in for the chapel services  
There is no shatter to the tranquility of today.

The sunshine is slashing through the snow  
And the sheer colors of white and snow  
Blow in the wind and sheaf up to a silhouette.

## Shelley's Gone A-Boating

Sunsets, evening stars, poets of older ages  
Quiet words, bold words, leap out of parchment pages  
Styles dignified and refined, bold and crude  
Strip the hide, leaving souls and hearts nude  
This is the power of poetry, the power of words  
The man chasing the maiden, the songs of birds  
Are heard by the human heart's fertile imagination  
Lighting the vast space of every nation.

Twilights, dappled colors, splendor falls,  
Eagles clasping far away castle walls  
The Lady of Shalott and Kennedy's Camelot  
Willows whiten, aspens quiver, love sought  
Keats'odes and Cortez gazing on the ocean blue  
And the power of Franny, their love so true  
And the power of kings overshadowed by flowers  
Raining pride and its prejudice showers.

Grant us words to lighten the world's odes  
And I'll clasp the walls of my abode  
With autumn's mists and fellow fruitfulness  
A bosom-friend of vines that lines faithfulness  
And the solitary reaper alone in her field  
Will palaces and prophets and pilgrimages build  
So we'll go no more roving on oceans bleak  
But stronger the words, the poet the meek.

### The Legacy

There's a legacy  
buried deep in the mountains,  
sequestered low in the valleys,  
blooming colorfully in the meadows,  
composed in the graveyard.

There's a legacy  
entombed deep in the lines of her face,  
engraved in the values of her heart,  
tranquilized in the recesses of her soul,  
screened in the graveyard.

## The Autumn Leaf

A golden yellow  
autumn leaf  
swirls like a dancer  
on a stage  
on opening night,  
twirls like a candy stick  
on the barber shop  
pole,  
dances to the tune  
of nature's  
melodious  
song,  
then falls to the earth-bed,  
breaking the monotony  
of an otherwise  
same-O,  
same-O  
day.

### Ciphering Students in the 1990's

It would be easier, I do believe, to decipher the Maya and Aztec codes than to cipher one student in the 1990's educational system.

In the middle of a small talk on sentence structure that's really going well, or so I thought, one student with a pencil unsharpened

cries out, "What's for lunch?" Now why is that so important in second period? He looks extremely well-fed, and he constantly complains about cafeteria

lunches. Then the inevitable question, "Do we need our English books?" "Of course not, why would we need English books?" I moan.

Of course they need their English books. This is from a student who lost his book the second week of school! Am I the only one in this class-

room? Am I the only one learning and writing and worrying? Worrying about their future abilities to read and write and think critically?

Their minds carry more worries at fourteen than I carried at 31. I cannot force them to see that high school days should be pleasant days,

Days that are filled with the wonders of leaning and expressing themselves and learning the meanings of friendships and abilities and limitations.

Oh, that the giftee would give me eyes to cipher and decipher the hearts and future lives of these children and give me the wisdom of Solomon

to mete out teachings to favor each one of them individually and personally. Cipher the talents and encourage that talent even for the world.

### The Loving Fugitive

Red head and arcane. David eludes the gun,  
the knife, the sawblade, the whispering  
motions behind Chinese fans that blade open.

A crucial heartbeat is missing in action  
from his life. The loving part of life  
and reverence he lost cannot be found.

Another bank, another train, another woman,  
another night spent in husky darknesses,  
and he loses pieces of his soul to the holes.

He blunders drunk into the back of someone's  
space and finds a trapped door and the lead  
of pencil, straight and straight and straight.

Only in death can he lie beside the loving,  
only in death can he hush the lie of fugitive,  
only in death do legends birth without pain.



## Colors

Drop me, plunge me into the colors of my life  
Like swimming in an ocean of dappled designs.

Colors of splashes of life in action, in motion,  
In bright living color, animated, alive, energetic.

Splash me into performing images of life that I  
Will remember when sun-balls fade out on me and mine.

Unravel, disclose all the yellows and blues and  
Greens that dim below the surface, but brighter

When I scandal myself into the moving scenes  
Of my picture entitled appropriately Louise.

All one's life is imminent in the purples of  
Fervor and zeal and inspiration, sweating

Inspiration that invades every pore in chambers  
Of heart and mind and body and soul and life.

Efface not even the twilight blacks and browns  
That color in the pictures of one's life

For they speak of settlement and value  
That honor the colors and splashes and passions

Of me, Louise.

## The Potency of the Imagination

In reading or writing poetry, a reader or writer must have and apply the imagination. John Keats, one of England's most distinguished and eloquent poets, believed that the imagination could elevate the common experience into an extraordinary experience. Just as an ancient Greek painter created scenes of life on a Grecian urn, so could poets create rich and munificent scenes and flame the imagination of readers.

Keats' poems possess distinct qualities and a concreteness of description that use all the senses-gustatory, tactile, kinetic, visceral, visual, and auditory-which he combines to give an appreciation of an experience.

Keats' does just this in his wonderful poem, "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer." Readers vicariously experience the discovery of an ocean as they stand with Cortez upon a peak in Darien with a wild surmise in eyes and a feeling an awesome power as everyone is silent.

The fact that Balboa discovered the Pacific and not Cortez may matter to historians, but not necessarily to poets who create their own worlds and people those worlds with the characters that they choose. In poetry, it is the perceptual that matters, the bathetic feelings, or even the grotesque or bizarre visuals.

In Samuel Taylor Coleridge's, "Kubla Khan" the stark images that he uses to almost entrance the reader are so vivid, because

he uses the senses. Readers see the "stately pleasure dome" and the "sacred river," running through caverns that are measureless to man and then on down into a sunless sea. Who can forget the Abyssinian damsel with her dulcimer-and the reader wonders exactly what song is she playing, what minor chords does she strike upon?-the woman wailing, not crying but wailing, for her demon lover, and the prophet crying, "Beware! Beware!" The poem causes chill bumps that equals any Stephen King could effect.

So poetry is more than mere words scribbled upon a blank page, but images that evoke and inspire and translates and transfigures an experience into a happening. Furthermore, it takes a craftsman to draft the words into just such images. John Keats, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Bysshe Shelley were just such craftsmen. Their poetry focused not only on the visible, but the invisible as well. Readers must see beyond the still-life figures on Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn" to see the panting young lovers in flight and pursuit, or the pastoral piper playing his pipes, or the priest and townspeople in moving action. This is the power of images once they have been implanted into the minds of readers. This is the potency of imagination.

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## Prologue

Celie Coffey blinked. She asked Alonzo to repeat the lab results again. Cancer was such a dreadful word, and she felt an ache in the pit of her stomach. What would become of her children and grandchildren?

"Celie, do you want to call your husband? Perhaps you would like to call one of your children?"

"No, I want to tell them later. They are all coming in this weekend. We are having a reunion and a celebration. I'll tell them then, I think. Thank you, Alonzo, for everything. I know that you have done your best. You have always been so kind and supportive."

"If you need me for anything, Celie, you know you can call me day or night. You seem like family to me, and I think a great deal of you and your family."

"I know you do. And if I need anything, I will call."

Alonzo Collins had known Celie Coffey and her family for close to fifty years, and he watched her as she slowly walked down the hall. She was still a beautiful woman, and although she didn't know it, Alonzo had been in love with her for many,

many years. He closed his door to his office and suffered his private anguish.

Celie spent three hours shopping in the Baytown Mall and then she had her hair done at Dollern's. There was so much to do before this weekend. She had spent three months preparing for this reunion and nothing was going to spoil it. She had waited for so long for her family to be together again, and she was not going to allow even this, cancer, to ruin it.

She and Issac had been married for forty years. Forty years. The years seemed to have flown by. They had had seven children. Six of those children were coming home this weekend. The seventh, little Jacob, was gone. Buried in the family cemetery on top of the hill behind their home. Little Jacob had fallen into a fire and died when he was seven. They had had a fireplace in the house they had lived in before the business had grown, and they had moved into a larger house. Little Jacob and his sister Anna Louise had been playing, and he had fallen into the fireplace. Sometimes she could still hear the screams of her little son and see the awful burns that covered his little body. Two days later, he had died. The house was quiet for a long time after Jacob's death, but soon the sounds and laughter of six children brought her to life again. Life had continued on.

She had been thinking a great deal about Jacob lately. The cute little boy with the blond curls and the beautiful green eyes and a dimple in his left cheek still entered her dreams and heart often.

Now, after so many disagreements and discord, her family was finally coming home. There was still so much to do, but Celie looked forward to this reunion and knew that this was the last chance for them all to be together and forgive and forget old wounds and hurts of the past. Perhaps this was even a new beginning for her children and grandchildren. She had so much to tell them all. She had so much love that she wanted to give before time ran out on her.

## Chapter 1

Celie walked in the front door of her beautiful home. She had often thought that this home was her achievement. Every thing in this house had been chosen with care and concern. Anna Louise had often said that her mother should have been an interior decorator. Her mother knew colors and designs and flowers.

Anna Louise had always been the strong one, Celia thought as she laid her bags on a chair in the foyer. Anna Louise had even jumped to the rescue of her older brother Jacob when the flames were spreading on his small body. Anna Louise had grabbed a small rug and was beating the flames trapped in his little overalls. She had been so calm until it was over, and then the anguish and pain had set in.

Celie thought now of the divorce that Anna Louise was facing and decided to call and see how things were going. She knew Spencer well enough to know that a divorce was likely to be ugly. Spencer was a selfish and powerful man.

Celie remembered the first time that Spencer had entered



their lives. A storm had blown up like dust on a prairie and everyone had been advised to stay indoors and not travel on the roads. She remembered they had all been huddled before a huge, roaring fire when a knock sounded at the door, and Issac had answered to find a tall, handsome man standing on the porch trying to find shelter from the blizzard. She had seen the look in her daughter's eyes that day, and knew things would never be the same for Anna Louise.

So unlike her second daughter, Helen. Helen was practical. She was also hard to please and selfish. Helen demanded a great deal of attention, and when she didn't get it, she could be spiteful and even dangerous. As they had all learned, to their great hurt.

## Chapter 2

Anna Louise thought it was a beautiful home. Lush hibiscus and red and yellow roses surrounded the home. A large umbrella tree shrouded the fences that surrounded the front yard. There was a snakelike drive that winded up the lane leading to the house. Quiet and peaceful. There were birds singing in the trees and a creek that ran on the west side of the house. It was a large house with lots of rooms and a large library. Maybe she would find time now to read all the books she'd been meaning to read for years. Now that her marriage was over.

What a fool I've been, she thought as she walked up to the front door. What a fool.

Just when things seemed perfect, something had to go awry. Good old Spencer Sutton, husband, father, lover, friend, successful business tycoon, cheater, perfidious snake. She thought everything was so good. And then he walks in with a twenty-two year old for goodness' sake.

She kept replaying the scene in her head. Maybe if she kept thinking about it, she might come up with the clues that

must have been there all along, but she just hadn't seen them.

Hollie Bently was their housekeeper who worked three days a week: Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday. Those days Anna Louise usually had her hair done, did her weekly shopping, and often had lunch with her daughter Susannah, so the maid had the house to herself. So it came as quite a surprise one late Friday afternoon, not feeling very well and taking a rain check on lunch, she came home early and found her housekeeper and her husband in a compromising situation.

There had been a great deal of screaming and crying, but it had all been to no avail. Spencer moved out and in with Holly and Anna Louise had found herself alone for the first time in her life. At first, it was frightening and hard to adjust to, but now things were beginning to look not quite so bad. If the truth were known, she was beginning to enjoy it.

Anna Louise heard the phone ringing in the house and ran to answer it. Her twins, Hannah and Annah Laurie, were going with her to the reunion this weekend and had promised to call to make plans for the trip to Louisville, Kentucky.

But it was her lawyer instead. "I'm afraid I have bad news, Anna Louise," Clinton Schaefer was saying.

"How bad can it be, Clinton?"

"Spencer says you can have the house on Belaveau Drive, but he intends to keep the house in the Virgin Islands. Also,

he says you can have the Jeep, but he gets the SEL. He also says there's very little money."

"Very little money!" He's a successful businessman. We have gone to Europe for the past three years, given lavish parties, entertained his clients, bought three new cars this year alone, and bailed his criminal brother out of numerous scraps. How could there be very little money?"

"He says business has been slacking off, and you have simply been living above his means."

"I don't believe it. His lifestyle hasn't changed since he met Miss Bentbly."

"I'm sorry, Anna Louise. I am going to do my best to see that you get what's due you."

"Right, and if that means that you have to take him to the cleaners and press his shirt, do it!"

Anna Louise thought that if it was the last thing she did on this earth, she would get even with that snake.

### Chapter 3

Helen Ziegenfuss was arguing with her husband, her fifth husband to be exact. Her husband, Geary, was afraid the neighbors would hear them arguing and call the police. It wouldn't be the first time, and he didn't like making scenes.

"When are you ever going to be a man? Can't you find a job and keep it?"

"I've been trying. Jobs are hard to find when you don't have a degree or skills that people are looking for. I can't help the fact that the Shoe Factory shut down. A lot of people are looking for jobs. I'm not the only one."

"Why I had to end up with a loser like you is beyond me."

"The neighbors are going to call the police again if you don't quiet your voice."

"Let them call. I don't care what the neighbors think."

Geary found his jacket lying on the floor and put it on.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"Out."

"Yeah, that's right. Bail out. You're such a loser."

Geary slammed the door as he left. The night air was just what he needed. Helen was becoming unbearable, and he knew just what was going on. You didn't have to be a rocket scientist to figure it out. She was seeing somebody else. She had too much money, and neighbors watched him leave and come with that look. He'd been in this situation before with his first and second wives. Helen was right; he was a loser. But he admitted to himself that he loved Helen. He did everything he could to make her life easier. He did the cleaning, the cooking, the shopping. He wanted to be a good husband, and really he tried, but it didn't seem that he was doing too well.

Her family was getting together this weekend, and Helen hadn't seemed to be too excited although it had been almost ten, or was it eleven years, since they had gotten together. Not since that horrible accident. He wondered where Helen's brother and sister, Lincoln and Isabella, were now. He had always liked Lincoln. Lincoln was a good person, and had had a great future ahead of him until that horrible accident. He wondered now where he was and what he was doing. Isabella scared him to death. She was so beautiful. She was a successful actress living in California. Geary continued walking. He didn't see the speeding car veering toward him.

## Chapter 4

Lincoln watched as the nurse brought him his sleeping tablets. They never allowed him to stay awake very long. They were afraid of him, and it showed in the way they treated him at this fancy sanitorium. The strait jackets, the padded cells, the sleeping pills, the tortures he endured were ways of keeping him from injuring himself and others.

"Now be a good boy and take your medicine." She looked like an Amazon from the pits of Hades. She had huge jaws and rolls of fat hung from her face. She was dark and hairy like a spider and her ears looked like pears that had been divided and pasted to her face.

"Why don't we go on a date, Lettie. Just you and me. We'd have a good time."

"Are you crazy? I take that back. You are crazy. I wouldn't go with you anywhere."

"You shouldn't make the patients angry. Besides you haven't been on a date since the medieval ages."

"Listen, you lunatic, if you don't shut up, I'll make it rougher on you than it already is. Don't mess with me.

She stuffed the tablet into his mouth and stomped out. After she left, the room was silent. There were no birds singing

outside his window or children playing in the front yard. And the voices were coming back, louder and louder. The dreams were there within reach if only he would listen. The awful pains within his head made the room reel and spin. He didn't like this closed-in feeling he had. He wanted to scream and scream until the blood rushed to his head. He wanted to feel alive and free.

Free. They were going to release him this weekend. A family reunion. His father had called in some favors and pulled some strings to get loose for two, or was it three, days. Maybe after the barbeque and the "hi, how are yous" and the looks he would get when he told them that he was still in the nut house and, yes, there were still voices in his head, he'd leave, run away.

He soon drifted into sleep and the dreams returned to choke him and hold him down until he couldn't breathe anymore.

Isabella came off the stage and walked into her dressing room. There were many well-wishers who wanted to congratulate her on her success in her play. She accepted the flowers and the wine and then her press agent announced that there would be a reception in the King's Room at 12:30 that night. She noticed that that man was in the crowd again. She caught a glimpse of him as he turned right behind the curtain. She



noticed the ragged scar on his left cheek and the thin lips and the black, cold eyes.

The door closed behind her as she entered her room and sat down. He was watching her. She could feel it. It was as tangible as the flowers she now held in her arms.

The door burst open and her press agent, William John Heaney, walked in.

"You were the toast of the town, Isabella. The critics are raving about your performances and the movie executives are beginning to ask questions. They want to know if you're committed to a contract, who your press agent and manager are, things like that, baby. We're on our way, honey!"

"We! What exactly are the critics saying?"

"This is a rising, new star that we will have to keep our eyes on, 'a superb performance by one of the newest and brightest stars on Broadway today.'"

"William, it sounds wonderful."

"Isabella, is something wrong? You don't sound as excited as I thought you would. I've known you for a long time. Come now, what's wrong?"

"He's following me again."

"We've been through this before. He's dead. Buried. Cold. Rigor mortis. The last and final act."

"He's not dead. He's here in New York and he's following

me. I see him. Glimpses of his coat or hat. His scar..."

"Isabella, a lot of men have scars. A lot of men wear coats and hats..."

"I'm serious. Find a private investigator. I want him found and confronted."

"Do you think that's the right decision to make?"

"I am not going to live the rest of my life looking behind my back."

"Perhaps this weekend I can find the time to find someone to look into this matter."

"That will be a good idea. By the way, this weekend is the reunion. I'm sure it will be a bore, but I'm committed, and I have to go. I have to look out for my inheritance."

"Perhaps you would like me to drive you down there?"

"No, dear sister Betsy and I are going to make the drive down together. Just see that you find a private investigator that knows his job and can keep his mouth shut."

William John Heaney watched Isabella undress and get ready for the reception. He had loved this woman for seventeen years, but she thought of him as a patsy, someone to fetch and carry and clean up all the messes. And there had been a lot of messes to clean up. The ache in his heart reminded him of the biggest mess he'd had to clean up, the death of their little son, Paris, conceived and then born and then found dead in Paris. He waited

until she had left the dressing room and gone to the reception before he picked up the phone and made a call to the man with a ragged scar on his face. Little Paris. He thought then that they would be a family, but the ambitious Isabella had other plans and stages to conquer.

Betsy was packing for the weekend reunion. She was so anxious to see everybody. She was in the middle of writing another novel, but she was putting everything aside because she had an announcement to make to her mother and she almost couldn't wait to tell her.

## Chapter 5

Betsy was a successful novelist and happy. Celia had always said that sunshine followed Betsy wherever she went. Betsy had a good marriage and, like her mother, seven children. There were Lizzie and Dial and Brack and Aaron and David and Max and Martha. The Birchwell house was always full of noise and children's toys and laughter and stereos blasting and animals and fun. Betsy was a successful mother and wife who enjoyed her family tremendously. She was fun to be around and entertaining.

She was anxious about the reunion, but excited too. She was riding down with Isabella, her famous actress sister, and Betsy's husband Acie had said that he'd be coming later in the day. Betsy was close to her mother and often spent hours talking to her on the phone. She sent cards and gifts and clippings about her books.

Her mother had been there for her when after writing her mystery novel, Death's Quiet Stalk, a story about a man who kidnaps a busload of children and their teacher, a man had done

exactly that and many blamed her book for instigating the crime. Of course, that was ridiculous, but many believed that he had gotten the notion after reading her book. Her mother had always encouraged her talent and had been there to do much of the early editing of her books.

"Betsy, I'm home."

After fourteen years of marriage, she still loved the sound of his voice.

"Darling, how was work today."

"Booming as usual."

"Good."

"And how's your newest creation coming? Are your characters living and breathing yet?"

"As a matter of fact, they are. I think my hero in this novel is beginning to look a lot like a certain man in my life. Tall, dark, handsome, successful, kind, compassionate..."

"Okay, who is he?"

"Who?"

"This tall, dark handsome man you're talking about."

"Why, you my love. My sweet, sweet love."

"You are wonderful, Betsy. Have I told you lately how much you mean to me?"

"Yes, but you can tell me again."

"Dinner is ready." The housekeeper had come in so quietly

or maybe they were just so engrossed in each other that they hadn't heard her.

"To dinner, darling, and then to bed, for the children are fed and the lovers are wed."

"Hum, a new rhyme for a new children's book."

"Of course not, darling, that is much too much lusty for children's books."

"I agree."

"By the way, are you picking up Isabella or is she picking you up? I may need to use your car and put mine in the shop."

"She is picking me up."

"That is splendid."

## Chapter 6

Celia baked bread for two days and the smells permeated the house. Everyone was stopping in the kitchen to taste and smell the breads and cakes and muffins. Drua had always loved to cook. Celia's sixth child was always in the kitchen as a child experimenting with recipes. Now Drua owned a little bakery in Frankfort. Drua had been her shy one, wary of strangers, quiet, bookish. Celia wondered what Drua was baking for the reunion.

The police officer stood in front of Drua, looking at the bruises on her face. She was pretty, the officer thought, beneath the black and blue places on her face. She had long blond hair that almost sweep the ground. He had never seen hair that long before. She seemed shy, helpless.

"Are you sure you won't press charges against him, Mrs. Taulbee?"

"No, I don't want to press charges against him."

"Do you have somewhere to go?"

"I'm staying with a friend tonight. She should be here pretty soon. She's going to let me stay with her this week and this weekend I'm going to my mother's. We're having a reunion."

The police officer thought she might cry at any moment. She looked so bewildered. She seemed so unsure of herself.

"Are your children okay?"

"Yes, they're in the car. They're scared. I don't plan to go back to him. I'm leaving for good this time."

"I hope so. You don't have to take abuse. There are shelters and people willing to help."

"I know. The lady officer was really kind to me, and I really appreciate her help."

"Mattie is kind. She'll help you if you ever need help. She's really involved in women's rights and protecting women from abuse, things like that. If you need someone to talk to, she'll really help."

"Thanks. There's my friend now. Again, thanks."

"You're welcome. Remember what I said, if you need help, we're willing to help."

The police officer had reminded Drua of her cousin. Morgan was a police officer who patrolled the streets, catching crooks, arresting drug dealers, helping abused and battered women.

She and Morgan were close, but he didn't know about the



abuse that Anderson was handing out. If Morgan had known, he'd probably kill Anderson. They were riding down together this weekend for the reunion. She'd have to buy some heavy-duty make-up to cover the bruises. She couldn't wait to see her mother. Drua thought maybe she'd tell her mother about Anderson and the abuse, maybe she could stay with her mother until she could find an apartment. She was frightened of Anderson. Maybe things would improve soon.

The Perfumed Letter

by

Louise Prater

## Chapter 1

The smells of jasmine and rose and orange blossoms pervaded the air as Vikktoria Destomina walked into the perfume shop, La Jour Cairu, on Elmsin Street in New Orleans. The air hung heavy with the scents causing Viky to breathe deeply.

"May I help you?" asked an old wrinkled lady standing in the shadows toward the back of the shop.

"I don't know. I'm looking for something special for my grandmother. Something out of the ordinary."

"Ah, I see. Something special. Perhaps you would like to see our catalog. We carry many different scents, different formulas. Often, we prefer that our customers come in so that we match body chemistry with our scents. Perhaps this is possible?"

"No, that's not possible."

"I see. Well, we'll do what we can. You see perfume smells differently on each woman. We say that one's life and experiences form some of the body's chemistry, and we must take all that into consideration when designing a perfume."

"Yes, I understand."

"Perhaps you would like for me to show you around?"

"Perhaps another time. I need to be going."

As Viky closed the door to the shop, the night's moonlight shone over the streets, casting long shadows. Perhaps that was a bad idea, she thought; I should never have gone into that shop. The old woman, that had to be her, it had to be. Viky gathered her white cashmere shawl more closely about her shoulders and hurried on down the street toward her car parked in the lot beside an old warehouse called Red's Responsible's Storage.

Viky sat in her car for a few moments before starting it and driving carefully out into the lane leading to the street. If only I hadn't seen her, if only I hadn't allowed myself to become so involved, so involved with him. She had to drive slowly and carefully, because the tears were rolling down her face making it difficult for her to see the traffic.

The old woman in the shop gathered the last of the ledgers and put them into a drawer in an old tall chest of carved and gilded wood. The drawers were of different sizes, but the top of the chest was composed of a compartment of small drawers. After putting the ledgers into the bottom drawer, she opened the top compartment and withdrew a picture and a letter. Violettia knew this day would come. The pain and suffering ahead would have been tolerable if only her precious Jean-Claude were here. But he wasn't, and the strength and the courage

she had always admired in him, she would have to take for her own. The draperies were closed and now the shop was quiet. She gazed at the picture for a long while. The picture of a young couple, obviously much in love, with two small sons. Her sons. Jean-Claude's sons. Sons that had been her life, her very life, until that tragic day. But no, she wasn't going to think of that day now. She would not allow that suffering to surface today. She would hold it down until another day, another hour, another moment.

Violettia had known great poverty. Her mother had been a servant in the Classeau home for many years. Jean-Claude's mother had hired her mother as a helper, and because of that gesture, and Violettia and her mother Henlena had always felt that it was that--a gesture of help and compassion--that had kept them from living on the streets.

Henlena was a beautiful woman with hair so black it had blue wings in it, eyes the color of chestnuts, full, red lips, and beautiful high cheekbones. Wherever her mother went, there were stares and looks of admiration. She carried herself well. But after her husband's death, Henlena never remarried, for she said herself that one love dimmed other men in the world for her. Oh, there were many offers and dates, but Henlena had never remarried.

Violettia wished now for her mother. Wished for the advice

and wisdom of her mother. The day had come. She knew she would have to face the tragedy again, to relive a day that had taken one of her sons and scarred the other for life. There was nothing but to prepare herself for it. That young woman with the sad eyes, eyes that were forlorn and lost, was her son's wife. She felt it in her heart.

Viky stopped for the light and dried her eyes with a handkerchief. The nightmares had started again, and he was screaming out in the night, waking up in a cold sweat. She couldn't help him until he opened up to her, but he seemed reluctant to do so. She had picked up bits and pieces, words spoken in his sleep, phrases, names yelled out in his nightmares. She drove carefully until she came to a driveway leading to a small house sitting on a hill behind a larger house and stables. Her small house was white frame with black shutters and a small veranda. The swing was swaying in the night air, and the leaves swept across the porch as she walked to the door. She could hear him pacing inside. He would be wondering where she was, why she wasn't there with him. She waited a moment before going in, even walking to the window and glancing in. She saw his back to the window. He had stopped and was standing in front of the fireplace. His shirt was hanging out of his jeans, and he was drinking. She saw the look of pain, anguish, on his face. She also saw the hideous scars crisscrossing his face. She walked up to the door and went in.

Violettia glanced back at the picture. The boys were ten and twelve in this picture. Blond, green eyes, small for their age then, and enough alike to be taken for twins. They spent all their time together: climbing trees, building a treehouse, swimming in the ocean, riding their bikes until late in the evening. Unspoiled and wild then. Their father adored them: reading to them at night before bedtime, watching them fish in the ponds on the estate, talking to them like little men. They were like their father, in looks and in temperment. In love, I was in love with their father to the exclusion of all else, she thought. He was so gentle, so strong, so brave. But he had died before that day, and I faced it alone and I did the things I thought were best. Perhaps I was wrong, but I had never faced a situation such as this before. Surely I can be forgiven for the wrong decisions, if only for making those decisions in ignorance.

They were dressed in blue jeans that day in the picture. They had been fishing and their hair was windblown. Their faces were glowing with the sun. They were laughing and happy. So happy. I don't remember any day, except that day, like I remember the day this picture was taken. And it had been taken by him. That hideous, hateful man who destroyed their lives. Who took what was precious and good, and destroyed it all out of hate and greed and jealousy.

Malcumium Delacrose sat in a chair reading the Sentinal Courier. The housekeeper quietly came into the room and picked up the silver tray sitting on the table beside the man's chair.

"I see, Olga, that your son has been arrested again for drinking and driving."

"Yes, sir."

"You reared worthless children, Olga. You really should let him sit in jail for awhile. He might, although I doubt it, he might learn his lesson."

"Perhaps, Mr. Delacrose, but..."

"Did you finish in the kitchen, Olga?"

"No, sir, I was going there as soon as I got your tray."

"Then I suggest you go about your business. I don't pay you to stand here and talk to me."

"No, sir."

"Now!"

Olga hurriedly picked up the tray and walked into the kitchen. She leaned heavily across the sink, ready to cry. I hate that man, she thought to herself, I hate that man with a passion. One of these days...

"Olga, please bring me a cup of coffee," Mr. Delacrose's voice came through into the room from the intercom.

"Now, Olga."

"Yes, sir."



"Thank you, Olga."

The moonlight streamed in the window, causing the shadows to lengthen to the chair where Malcumium sat reading. He glanced up once when he thought he heard the bushes rustling. But then he heard the wind blowing and began reading the paper again. He was a man who often glanced over his shoulder or thought he heard people in bushes or in attic rooms. He had made many enemies in his life; he was neither friendly nor compassionate. He often belittled acquaintances or colleagues for the sheer pleasure of it.

Again he heard the rustling in the bushes. The wind wasn't stirring that hard. He rose from his chair and stood up. That shadow had the figure of a man. A man in a black coat. A man he had seen before, but he couldn't quite place him. Yes, at the funeral. The funeral of her son.

When Olga walked in with Mr. Delacrose's coffee, she didn't see him at first. Thinking he had stepped out of the room, she placed the cup and saucer on the table beside the chair. She saw him then, dying on the floor in front of the chair. A huge red stain on his shirt was spreading, spreading on the rest of the shirt and onto the floor.

Olga quickly dialed the police and an ambulance.

All the while, she thought, Malcumium Delacrose would not be missed.

When Eli Milsene arrived on the scene, he noticed two things quickly. The man lying on the floor had been hit quickly and efficiently and Olga, the housekeeper, had a strange thin smile on her face.

"Looks like an intruder crept in and shot him. The window pane over the knob of the door has been smashed and the door pryed open. His hands are positioned so that maybe he raised his arms to defend himself. Looks quick and quiet. Olga, the housekeeper here, said she didn't hear a thing. Nothing taken, nothing disturbed, Sir." Bryan Wilcott was a young police officer who had worked with Eli before and had been the first one on the scene.

"How's Olga?" asked Eli.

"Olga's fine," replied the young officer. She was bringing Eli a cup of coffee when she saw him lying on the floor. She called us immediately."

"Thanks, Bryan."

"Sure thing, lieutenant."

"Eli, how are you doing?"

"Fine, Olga, how are you doing?" asked Eli.

"Fine."

"Didn't hear anything?"

"No, sir. I brought his coffee and saw him lying there."

"I take it he was as mean as ever, uh, Olga?"

"Yes, sir. Mean as ever."

"Did you hear anything?"

"No, sir, nothing but the wind rustling about. Maybe some noise on the porch."

"What kind of noise?"

"The swing rocking, leaves brushing across the porch, things like that."

"Had anyone called?"

"No, sir. No one called tonight."

"Lately then. Had he seemed agitated, upset about anything, maybe worried about something?"

"He did receive a phone call the day before yesterday. That would have been Wednesday. He seemed angry after that, but I don't know who called or what the call was about. But if he was worried or agitated, he didn't confide in me, Eli. I did my job and left."

"Thanks, Olga. If you think of anything, let me know, okay?"

"I will, Eli, and tell Betsie I said hello."

"I'll do that, Olga. She asks about you quite a bit. She hasn't forgotten your kindness last year when we lost our

daughter, and I haven't either."

"Was glad to do what I could do."

Eli watched Olga walk away and thought about that kindness. They had just given up hope when little Peggy died last year. Peggy was the only one they had, and they were still adjusting to their loss. Olga had seen to it that they were eating right and often came and just sat with Betsie to try to comfort her and be with her if she needed to talk.

Now Eli wondered about the intruder and who had called Malcumium to make him so angry. Eli and Malcumium went back a long way, longer than Eli liked to acknowledge. They had been neighbors and Eli had been friends with Jean-Claude Classeau for many years. Fishing buddies, traveling to Alabama, Florida, Alaska, trying to catch the "big one," hunting together, talking about about sports and life and women. So Eli had been there when Jean-Claude had died and the awful tragedy came later.

"Boys, got those pictures?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, let the coroner have him them."

## Chapter 2

Jacques Classeau looked up when Vikky walked in. He saw her hang up her coat in the closet and watched her walk over to him.

"Where have you been."

"I went for a drive."

"This late?"

"Just to get away."

"You've been to see her. The smell of those perfumes. Whenever you walk into her shop, you always walk out with fragrances hanging to you."

"She didn't know me. I just had to see her."

"How did she look?"

"Sad. Old."

"And the shop?"

"Beautiful. So many old and beautiful things. And those wonderful smells. Orange blossoms, lavender, rose, lots of smells I couldn't identify. Maybe jasmine too."

"That sounds like her shop. Smells. Wood smells too."

He loved her. He couldn't deny that, but the private torments were driving them apart. If only he could come to some peace within himself. The last ten years had been a struggle, but he thought he had come to some terms about it

until about three days ago when he had received that disturbing phone call. He still hadn't told Vikky about the phone call. He didn't want to worry her, didn't want to burden her with something else relating to his torments, even though he knew she loved him, loved him as much as even his parents had loved him. She had loved and lived with him all the deep wounds and scars. The scars were something he had learned to live with, the stares of strangers and the frightened looks of children. One of the reasons he had never wanted children was the hideous scars all over his face and body. He didn't want his own child growing up having to look at his body and listening to the taunts of other kids when they saw his father. Vikky had wanted children. She said the scars didn't matter, didn't change the person inside. But these scars had. They had changed a family and destroyed him to some extent. He hadn't really been happy since that day. Oh, there had been moments of happiness and pleasure, but not the settled peace he so earnestly craved and wished for.

And now that phone call had come, and he worried again. Somebody knew the secret he had been trying to hide these years. Knew too many details for it to be a prank call.

"Would you like something to eat?"

"Yeah, I think I am hungry," he said.

"I think a casserole. Perhaps chicken and broccoli."

"That sounds great, Vikky."

Listening to Vikky in the kitchen, Jacques thought back to his childhood. He had been really happy then. He and Milton had been playmates and brothers and friends. Fishing and swimming. Exploring caves and wooded places on the estate. Discovering that wonderful tunnel, a deep, dark tunnel that led back to adventure and action for two active, energetic boys. Careful not to cross Mr. Delacrose's property line, watching the man standing in his yard with his dogs, the rifle cocked in his elbow, watching the boys, yelling if they got too close. Adventure. Plundering through attics and basements and mom's wonderful perfume shop with its wonderful smells and old furniture. Going through drawers. Growing up. Girlfriends and dates and dances and cars. Yes, he had been happy then, so had Milton. Milton with his wonderful laugh that roared, his sense of fun and love of life. What was the name of that girl he liked so much, Hillary, Hanna, something like that. He had thought at the time that he would never forget even the small, trivial things that mattered so much then. Ten years. Ten long years.

Just then the doorbell rang.

"I'll get it, Vikky."

When he opened the door, Eli Milsene stood there.

"Hello, Eli."

"Jacques, how are you doing?"

"Fine."

They stood there for a moment, looking at each other.

Ten years was a long time, and time changes us all.

"Jacques, have you forgotten your manners? "Vikky said from the foyer.

"I'm sorry, Eli, I guess I was staring."

"That's okay, son, I guess one needs to get adjusted to someone he hasn't seen in years."

"Come in. What brings you here?"

"I just came from Malcumium Delcrose's home. Seems some intruder got himself in and shot him. The housekeeper was there. Seems the intruder took a chance being there. Anyway, he's dead, and I'm investigating the case."

"Murdered. No leads I suppose?" Vikky asked.

"Too early for that really."

"I'm not going to stand here, Eli, and pretend it's a tragedy. You know my position, but I didn't kill him. I've been here."

"Yeah, just came by, that's all. I have a gut feeling, and that's all it is, a gut feeling that this is connected to your tragedy all those tears ago. Seems Malcumium received a phone call about two days ago that rather angered him."

"A phone call!"



"Yeah, is something wrong?"

"No"

"You sure?"

"Yeah, I was just thinking that Malcumuim had a lot of enemies. Maybe he made enemies in the firm. He was a lawyer and cut a lot of deals. Maybe someone is out for revenge. Could be any number of possiblities where he's concerned."

"I know, but I'm covering ground."

"I understand. How's Betsie these days?"

"Doing pretty well. She's still sad, of course, we probably won't ever really be the same, but she's doing well."

"That's good. If there's anything we can do, will you let us know?"

"I will and thanks. Well, I need to be going. If you ever think of anything or recall anything, let me know, will you?"

So Malcumium received a phone call. If the same person called Malcumium that had called him, there just might be some connection like Eli had said. The phone call lingered in his mind. It seemed unlikely that two people involved in that tragedy would receive phone calls ten years later at the same time. And Malcumium was dead, murdered. Perhaps the caller

was the murdered. If so, Jacques thought, I may be in trouble. Serious trouble. Maybe he needed to talk to his mother. Would she talk to him? Would she allow him to walk into the shop and let him see that letter? That letter. He felt he needed to reread that letter. It might clear some of the confusion and doubts he had.

"Jacques!"

"I'm sorry, I didn't hear you."

"I noticed. I called your name three times. Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine."

Violettia placed the letter back into the secret drawer in the chest. She couldn't read that letter again. Not now. She had too many bad memories invading her tonight. She felt something in the air, something sinister, forbidding. Perhaps she was thinking too much about the past. That visit tonight by the young lady in the red dress, perhaps she had brought those feelings. There had been something in her eyes, a knowledge about what? She finished putting things away when she heard a quiet footstep upon the stairs. A quiet footstep. Too quiet.

She quickly closed the door to the room she was in and

waited. Waited for fifteen, twenty minutes. Nothing. I'm imagining things. She opened the door and gazed into the hall and the steps off the foyer. She couldn't see anyone, but the shadows of the closing night made it difficult to see and she wasn't wearing her glasses.

"Ms. Classeau, are you here?"

"Oh, Sissy, is that you?"

"Yes, ma'am, were you expecting someone else?"

"No, I guess I'm imagining things. I thought I heard someone on the stairs."

"It's this night, ma'am. It's windy and unusually dark out tonight. Would you like a cup of tea?"

"Yes, I believe I would. I think that sounds wonderful, Sissy."

"It'll only take me a few minutes to fix it."

"I think we'll have it in here, Sissy."

"Yes, ma'am."

Violettia continued putting things away and closing shop for the night. She didn't see the man standing behind her until it was too late and then she saw but a glance, a quick glance but a sense of recognition flashed through her mind before the

heavy object came down and hit her on the head.

When Sissy came in and saw Violettia lying on the floor, a scream escaped her before she gathered herself together and called the police and an ambulance. Sissy checked Violettia's pulse and found that she was still alive and breathing. But that gash on her head looked nasty. Violettia groaned a couple of times before she blacked out altogether.